

THE GREAT ASSIZE:

S E R M O N

ROMANS xiv. 10.

This Sermon is not to be sold, but given away.

L O N D O N:

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R O M A N S xiv. 10.

We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

1. **H**OW awful a solemnity is at hand? Yet a little while, and we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For as I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. And in that day, Every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

2. Had all men a deep sense of this, how effectually would it secure the interests of society? For what more forcible motive can be conceived, to the practice of genuine morality? To a steady purpose of solid virtue? An uniform walking in justice, mercy, and truth? What could strengthen our hands in all that is good, and deter us from all evil, like a strong conviction of this, *The Judge standeth at the door:* and we are shortly to stand before him?

3. It may therefore be of use to consider,

I. The chief circumstances which will precede our standing before the judgment seat of Christ.

II. The judgment itself, and,

III. A few of the circumstances which will follow it.

I. Let us, in the first place consider the chief circumstances which will precede our standing before the judgment seat of Christ.

And 1st, || *God will shew signs in the earth beneath:* particularly he will arise to shake terribly the earth. *The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage. † There shall be earthquakes κατά τόπους* (not in divers only, but in all

|| Acts ii. 19.

† Luke xxi. 11.

places:

places: not in one only, or a few, but in every part of the habitable world:) even such as were not since men were upon the earth, so mighty earthquakes and so great. In one of these, * every island shall flee away, and the mountains will not be found. Mean time all the waters of the terraqueous globe will feel the violence of those concussions: † the sea and waves roaring, with such an agitation as had never been known before, since the hour that the fountains of the great deep were broken up, to destroy the earth which then stood out of the water and in the water. The air will be all storm and tempest, full of dark ‡ vapours and pillars of smoke; resounding with thunder from pole to pole, and torn with ten thousand lightnings. But the commotion will not stop in the region of the air: || the powers of heaven also shall be shaken. There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; those fixt, as well as those that move round them. The sun § shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. The ¶ stars shall withdraw their shining, yea and fall from heaven, being thrown out of their orbits. And then shall be heard the universal shout ** from all the companies of heaven, followed by the voice of the archangel, proclaiming the approach of the Son of God and man, and the trumpet of God, sounding an alarm to all that sleep in the dust of the earth. In consequence of this, all the graves shall open, and the bodies of men arise. The sea †† also shall give up the dead which are therein, and every one shall rise with his own body: his own in substance, although so changed in its properties, as we cannot now conceive. For †† this corruptible will then put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality. Yea, death and hades, the invisible world, shall deliver up the dead that are in them. So that

* Rev. xvi. 20. † Luke xxi. 25. ‡ Joel ii. 31. || Luke xxi. 25, 26. § Joel ii. 31. ¶ Joel iii. 15. ** Theff. iv. 16.
†† Rev. xx. 13. †† 1 Cor. xv. 53.

all who ever lived and died since God created man, shall be raised incorruptible and immortal.

2. At the same time the Son of man shall send forth his angels over all the earth, and * they shall gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. And the Lord himself shall come with clouds, in his own glory, and the glory of his Father, with ten thousand of his saints, even myriads of angels, and † shall sit upon the throne of his glory. And before him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, and shall set the sheep, the good, on his right hand, and the goats, the wicked, upon the left. Concerning this general assembly it is that the beloved disciple speaks thus: I saw ‡ the dead, all that had been dead, small and great stand before God. And the books were opened (a figurative expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among men) and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books according to their works.

II. These are the chief circumstances which are recorded in the oracles of God, as preceding the general judgment. We are, secondly, to consider the judgment itself, so far as it hath pleased God to reveal it.

1. The person by whom God will judge the world is his only begotten Son, whose goings forth are from everlasting, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Unto him, being the || out beaming of his Father's glory, the express image of his person, the Father hath § committed all judgment, because he is the Son of man: because, though he was ¶ in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he emptied himself, taking upon him the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. Yea, because being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself yet farther, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God hath highly

* Matt. xxiv. 31. † Matt. xxv. 31, &c. ‡ Rev. xx. 12.
|| Heb. i. 2. § John v. 22. 27. ¶ Phil. ii. 6, 7.

exalted him, even in his human nature, and ordained him, as man, to try the children of men, to be the Judge both of the quick and dead; both of those who shall be found alive at his coming, and of those who were before gathered to their fathers.

2. The time, termed by the prophet, *the great and the terrible day*, is usually in Scripture stiled *the day of the Lord*. The space from the creation of man upon the earth to the end of all things, is *the day of the sons of men*: the time that is now passing over us, is properly *our day*. When this is ended, *the day of the Lord* will begin. But who can say, how long it will continue? § *With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*. And from this very expression some of the ancient fathers drew that inference, that, what is commonly called *the day of judgment*, would be indeed a thousand years. And it seems they did not go beyond the truth: nay, probably they did not come up to it. For if we consider the number of persons who are to be judged, and of actions which are to be enquired into, it does not appear, that a thousand years will suffice for the transactions of that day. So that it may not improbably comprize several thousand years. But God shall reveal this also in its season.

3. With regard to the place where mankind will be judged, we have no explicit account in Scripture. An eminent Writer (but not he alone; many have been of the same opinion) supposes it will be on earth, where the works were done, according to which they shall be judged, and that God will in order thereto employ the angels of his strength,

“To smooth and lengthen out the boundless space,
And spread an area for all human race.”

§ 2 Pet. iii. 3.

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But perhaps it is more agreeable to our Lord's own account, of his *coming in the clouds*, to suppose it will be above the earth, if not "twice a planetary height." And this supposition is not a little favoured, by what St. Paul writes to the *Thessalonians*. † *The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who remain alive, shall be caught up together with them, in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. So that it seems most probable, the great white throne, will be high exalted above the earth.*

4. The persons to be judged, who can count, any more than the drops of rain, or the sands of the sea? *I beheld, saith St. John, a great multitude which no man could number, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.* How immense then must be the total multitude of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues? Of all that have sprung from the loins of *Adam*, since the world began, till time shall be no more? If we admit the common supposition, which seems no way absurd, that the earth bears at any one time no less than four hundred millions of living souls, men, women and children: what a congregation must all those generations make, who have succeeded each other for seven thousand years?

"Great Xerxes' world in arms, proud Cana's host,
They all are here: and here they all are lost.
Their numbers swell to be discerned in vain;
Lost as a drop in the unbounded main."

Every man, every woman, every infant of days that ever breathed the vital air, will then hear the voice of the Son of God, and start into life, and appear before him. And this seems to be the natural import of that expression, *the dead, small and great*: all universally, all without exception, all of every age, sex, or degree; all that ever lived and died, or underwent such a change as will be equi-

† 1 Thess iv. 16, 17.

valent with death. For long before that day the phantom of human greatness disappears and sinks into nothing. Even in the moment of death, that vanishes away. Who is rich or great in the grave?

5. And every man shall there give an account of his own works, yea, a full and true account, of all that he ever did while in the body, whether it was good or evil. O what a scene will then be disclosed, in the sight of angels and men! While not the fabled *Rhadamanthus*, by the Lord God Almighty, who knoweth all things in heaven and earth,

*Castigatque auditque dolos: subigitque fateri
Quæ quis apud superos, furto lætatus inani,
Distulit in seram commissa piacula mortem.*

Nor will all the actions alone of every child of man, be then brought to open view, but all their words: seeing § every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. So that by thy words as well as works, thou shalt be justified: or by thy words thou shalt be condemned. Will not God then bring to light every circumstance also, that accompanied every word or action, and if not altered the nature, yet lessened or increased the goodness or badness of them? And how easy is this to him, who is about our bed, and about our path, and spieth out all our ways? We know, the darkness is not darkness to him, but the night shineth as the day.

6. Yea, he will bring to light not the hidden works of darkness only, but the very thoughts and intents of the heart. And what marvel? For he searcheth the reins, and understands all our thoughts. All things are naked and open to the eyes of him, with whom we have to do. Hell and destruction are before him without a covering. How much more the hearts of the children of men?

§ Matt. xii. 36. 37.

7. And

7. And in that day shall be discovered every inward working of every human soul; every appetite, passion, inclination, affection, with the various combinations of them, with every temper and disposition that constitute the whole complex character of each individual. So shall it be clearly and infallibly seen, who was righteous, and who unrighteous; and in what degree every action, or person, or character, was either good or evil.

8. *Then the King will say to them on his right-hand, come ye blessed of my Father. For I was hungry and ye gave me meat, thirsty and ye gave me drink, I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and ye clothed me.* In like manner, all the good they did upon earth, will be recited before men and angels: whatsoever they had done either in word or deed, in the name, or for the sake of the Lord Jesus. All their good desires, intentions, thoughts, all their holy dispositions, will also be then remembered; and it will appear, That though they were unknown or forgotten among men, yet God noted them in his book. All their sufferings likewise, for the name of Jesus, and for the testimony of a good conscience, will be displayed unto their praise, from the righteous Judge, their honour before saints and angels, and the increase of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

9. But will their evil deeds too, (since if we take in his whole life, *there is not a man upon earth that liveth and sinneth not*) will these be remembered in that day, and mentioned in the great congregation? Many believe they will not, and ask, "Would not this imply, that their sufferings were not at an end, even when life was ended? Seeing they would still have a sorrow, and shame and confusion of face to endure?" They ask farther, How can this be reconciled with God's declaration by the prophet. || *If the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes*

and do that which is lawful and right; all his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be once mentioned to him. How is it consistent with the promise which God has made, to all who accept of the gospel-covenant, *† I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sin no more.* Or as the Apostle expresses it, *‡ I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more?*

10. It may be answered, it is apparently and absolutely necessary, for the full display of the glory of God, for the clear and perfect manifestation of his wisdom, justice, power, and mercy toward the heirs of salvation, that all the circumstances of their life should be placed in open view, together with all their tempers, and all the desires, thoughts and intents of their hearts. Otherwise how would it appear out of what a depth of sin and misery the grace of God hath delivered them? And, indeed, if the whole lives of all the children of men were not manifestly discovered, the whole amazing contexture of divine Providence could not be manifested; nor should we yet be able in a thousand instances,

To "justify the ways of God to man."

Unless our Lord's words were fulfilled in their utmost sense, without any restriction or limitation, *§ There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, or hid that shall not be known,* abundance of God's dispensations under the sun would still appear without their reasons. And then only when God hath brought to light all the hidden things of darkness, whosoever were the actors therein, will it be seen that wise and good were all his ways: that he saw through a thick cloud, and governed all things by the wise counsel of his own will: that nothing was left to the chance or the caprice of man, but

† Jer. xxxi. 34. ‡ Heb. viii. 12. § Matt. x. 26.

God disposed all *strongly and sweetly*, and wrought all into one connected chain of justice, mercy, and truth.

11. And in the discovery of the divine perfections, the righteous will rejoice with joy unspeakable; far from feeling any painful sorrow or shame, for any of those past transgressions, which were long since blotted out as a cloud, washed away by the blood of the Lamb. It will be abundantly sufficient for them, that *all the transgressions which they had committed shall not be once mentioned unto them*, to their disadvantage; that *their sins and transgressions and iniquities shall be remembered no more*, to their condemnation. This is the plain meaning of the promise: and this all the children of God shall find true, to their everlasting comfort.

12. After the righteous are judged, the King will turn to them upon his left hand, and they shall also be judged, every man *according to his works*. But not only their outward works will be brought into the account, but all the evil words which they have ever spoken; yea, all the evil desires, affections, tempers, which have or have had, a place in their souls, and all the evil thoughts or designs which were ever cherished in their hearts. The joyful sentence of acquittal will then be pronounced upon those on the right hand: the dreadful sentence of condemnation upon those on the left: both of which must remain fixt and unmoveable as the throne of God.

III. 1. We may, in the third place, consider a few of the circumstances which will follow the general judgment. And the first is the execution of the sentence pronounced on the evil and on the good. *These shall go away into eternal punishment, and the righteous into life eternal*. It should be observed, it is the very same word which is used, both in the former and latter clause: it follows, that either the punishment lasts for ever, or the reward too will come to an end. No, never unless God could come to an end, or his mercy
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and truth could fail. *Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father, and shall drink of those rivers of pleasure which are at God's right hand for evermore.* But here all description falls short; all human language fails! Only one who is caught up into the third heaven, can have a just conception of it. But even such a one cannot express what he hath seen: these things it is not possible for man to utter.

The wicked, mean time, shall be turned into hell, even all the people that forget God. They will be punished with everlasting destruction, from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. They will be cast into the lake of fire burning with brimstone, originally prepared for the devil and his angels; where they will gnaw their tongues for anguish and pain, they will curse God and look upward: there the dogs of hell, pride, malice, revenge, rage, horror, despair, continually devour them. There they have no rest, day or night, but the smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever. For their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched.

2. Then the heavens shall be shriveled up as a parchment scroll, and pass away with a great noise: they will flee † from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and there will be found no place for them. The very manner of their passing away is disclosed to us by the Apostle Peter: ‡ *In the day of God the heavens being on fire, shall be dissolved.* The whole beautiful fabric will be overthrown by that raging element, the connection of all its parts destroyed, and every atom torn asunder from the others. By the same, the || earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up. The enormous works of nature, the everlasting hills, mountains that have defied the rage of time, and stood unmoved so many thousand years, will sink down in fiery ruin. How much less will the works of art,

† Rev. xx. 11. ‡ 2 Pet. iii. 12. || Ibid v. 10.

though of the most durable kind, the utmost efforts of human industry, tombs, pillars, triumphal arches, pyramids, be able to withstand the flaming Conqueror. All, all will die, perish, vanish away, like a dream when one awaketh!

3. It has indeed been imagined by some great and good men, that as it requires that same Almighty Power, to annihilate things as to create, to speak into nothing, or out of nothing: so no part of, no atom in the universe, will be totally or finally destroyed. Rather, they suppose, that as the last operation of fire, which we have yet been able to observe, is to reduce into glass, what by a smaller force it had reduced to ashes: so in the day God hath ordained, the whole earth, if not the material heavens also, will undergo this change, after which the fire can have no farther power over them. And they believe this is intimated by that expression in the *Revelation* made to St. John †, *Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like unto crystal*. We cannot now either affirm or deny this: but we shall know hereafter.

4. If it be enquired by the scoffers, the minute philosophers, how can these things be? Whence should come such an immense quantity of fire as would consume the heavens, and the whole terraqueous globe? We would beg leave, first, to remind them that this difficulty is not peculiar to the Christian system. The same opinion almost universally obtained among the *unbigotted* heathens. So one of these celebrated *free-thinkers* speaks, according to the generally received sentiment;

Esse quoque in fatis reminiscitur, affore tempus,
Quo mare, quo tellus, correptaque regia cœli
Ardeat, & mundi moles operosa laboret.

But, secondly, it is easy to answer, even from our slight and superficial acquaintance with natural things, that there are abundant magazines of fire

ready prepared, and treasured up against the day of the Lord. How soon may a comet, commissioned by him, travel down from the most distant parts of the universe? And were it to fix upon the earth, in its return from the sun, when it is some thousand times hotter than a red hot cannon-ball, who does not see what must be the immediate consequence? But, not to ascend so high as the ethereal heavens, might not the same lightnings which *give shine to the world*, if commanded by the Lord of Nature, give ruin and utter destruction? Or, to go no farther than the globe itself: who knows what huge reservoirs of liquid fire are from age to age contained in the bowels of the earth? *Aetna, Hecla, Vesuvius*, and all the other Volcanos that belch out flames and coals of fire, what are they, but so many proofs and mouths of those fiery furnaces? And at the same time so many evidences, that God hath in readiness wherewith to fulfil his word. Yea, were we to observe no more than the surface of the earth, and the things that surround us on every side, it is most certain (as a thousand experiments prove, beyond all possibility of denial) that we ourselves, our whole bodies are full of fire, as well as every thing round about us. Is it not easy, to make this ethereal fire visible even to the naked eye? And to produce thereby the very same effects on combustible matter, which are produced by culinary fire? Needs there then any more, than for God to unloose that secret chain, whereby this irresistible agent is now bound down, and lies quiescent in every particle of matter? And how soon would it tear the universal frame in pieces, and involve all in one common ruin?

5. There is one circumstance more which will follow the judgment, that deserves our serious consideration. * *We look*, says the Apostle, *according to his promise, for new heavens and a new earth,*

* Chap. v. 13.

wherein dwelleth righteousness. The promise stands in the prophesy of *Isaiah*, || *Behold I create new heavens and a new earth. And the former shall not be remembered: so great shall the glory of the latter be.* These *St. John* did behold in the visions of God. *I saw, * saith he, a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. And only righteousness dwell therein. Accordingly he adds, † and I heard a great voice from the third heaven, saying, behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. Of necessity therefore they will all be happy: ‡ God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain. § There shall be no more curse; but they shall see his face, shall have the nearest access to, and thence the highest resemblance of him. This is the strongest expression in the language of scripture, to denote the most perfect happiness. And his name shall be on their foreheads. They shall be openly acknowledged as God's own property: and his glorious nature shall most visibly shine forth in them. And there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither the light of the sun: for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.*

IV. It remains only, to apply the preceding considerations to all who are here before God. In human courts, it is possible some who are guilty, may escape for want of evidence. But there is no want of evidence in that court. All men with whom you had the most secret intercourse, who were privy to all your designs and actions are ready before your face. So are all the spirits of darkness, who inspired evil designs, and assisted in the execution of them. So are all the angels of God, those eyes of the Lord, that run to and fro over all the earth, who watched over your soul, and laboured

for your good, so far as you would permit. So is your own conscience, a thousand witnesses in one, now no more capable of being either blinded or silenced, but constrained to know and to speak the naked truth, touching all your thoughts and words and actions. And is conscience as a thousand witnesses? yea, but God is as a thousand consciences! O who can stand before the face of *the great God, even our Saviour, Jesus Christ!*

See, see! He cometh! He maketh the clouds his chariots! He rideth upon the wings of the wind! A devouring fire goeth before him, and after him a flame burneth! See, he sitteth upon his throne, clothed with light as with a garment, arrayed with majesty and honour! Behold his eyes are as a flame of fire, his voice as the sound of many waters!

How will ye escape? Will ye call to the mountains to fall on you, the rocks to cover you? Alas, the mountains themselves, the rocks, the earth, the heavens are just ready to flee away! Can ye prevent the sentence? wherewith? With all the substance of thy house, with thousands of gold and silver? Blind wretch! Thou camest naked from thy mother's womb, and shalt go naked into eternity. Hear the Lord, the Judge; *Come ye blessed of my Father! inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.* Joyful sound! How widely different from that voice, which echoes through the expanse of heaven, *Depart, ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!* And who is he, that can prevent or retard the full execution of either sentence? Vain hope! Lo, Hell is moved from beneath, to receive those who are ripe for destruction! And the *everlasting doors lift up their heads*, that the heirs of glory may come in!

What manner of persons then ought we to be, in all holy conversation and godliness? We know it cannot be long, before the Lord will descend with the voice of the Archangel, and the trump of God; when every

every one of us shall appear before him, and give account of his own works. Wherefore beloved, seeing ye look for these things, seeing ye know, He will come and will not tarry, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless. Why should ye not? Why should one of you be found on the left hand, at his appearing? He willeth not that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance; by repentance to faith in a bleeding Lord; by faith to spotless love, to the full image of God renewed in the heart, and producing all holiness of conversation. Can you doubt of this, when you remember the Judge of all, is likewise the Saviour of all? Hath he not bought you with his own blood, that ye might not perish, but have everlasting life? O make proof of his mercy rather than his justice! Of his love rather than the thunder of his power! He is not far from every one of us: and he is now come, not to condemn, but to save the world. He standeth in the midst! Sinner, doth he not now, even now knock at the door of thy heart? O that thou mayest know, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace! O that ye may now give yourselves to him who gave himself for you, in humble faith, in holy, active, patient love! so shall ye rejoice with exceeding joy in his day, when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

F I N I S.